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A Strategy for Mexico?

by Johnny M. Lairsey Jr.

For over a century, United States foreign policy was guided by the Monroe doctrine. Then, around 1890, a nascent concept of American Imperialism was popularized and served to shift foreign policy away from the Monroe Doctrine.¹ Since then the United States has exercised many different forms of foreign policy. The current United States foreign policy as evinced by the United States Secretary of State proclaims that United States freedom and prosperity is linked to the freedom and prosperity of the rest of the world.² The approach the United States Department of State uses to preserve our freedoms and prosperity includes building and maintaining international relations and protecting ourselves and our allies against transnational threats.³ Given the existing conditions in Mexico and the United States current approach to foreign policy the United States should assert its national powers to defeat transnational criminal organizations and help to improve the conditions in Mexico. However, before taking action the United States must clearly articulate the purpose of why it is taking action in a foreign country.

In 2010 there were more than 15,000 people killed in Mexico.⁴ Complicating this statistic was the belief that Mexico is on the brink of becoming a failed state. Several articles were published substantiating this belief.⁵ Additionally, several other articles suggested the existing conditions in Mexico pose a significant strategic risk to the United States without elaborating on the nature of those risks. Why do the existing conditions in Mexico pose a significant risk to the United States? Answering this question is necessary in order to formulate a rational strategic response. Given its looming debt crisis, it is imperative that the United States develop a clear strategic end state prior to committing additional resources to defeat transnational criminal organizations in the United States and Mexico.

Should the United States employ its elements of national powers to defeat transnational criminal organizations in Mexico? What is the objective? Do the existing conditions in Mexico coupled with their proximity equate to a strategic threat to the United States? How does Mexico's current war on transnational criminal organizations impact the United States? The existing conditions in Mexico should be of concern to the United States for four reasons: spill over violence from Mexico to the United States, spread of corruption within the United States,

¹ Stephen Armstrong, *5 Steps to a 5 AP U.S. History* (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 2007), 182.

² U.S. Department of State, "Diplomacy in Action, Mission," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/rls/dosstrat/2004/23503.htm> (accessed March 21, 2011).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sara M. Llana, "Mexico drug war death toll up 60 percent in 2010. Why?," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 13, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2011/0113/Mexico-drug-war-death-toll-up-60-percent-in-2010.-Why> (accessed March 21, 2011).

⁵ George Friedman, "Mexico: On the Road to a Failed State?," STRATFOR Global Intelligence, posted May 13, 2008, http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/mexico_road_failed_state (accessed 21 March, 2011).

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economic impact on both countries Gross National Product and bad actors launching attacks on the United States from ungoverned areas in Mexico. Within each of the aforementioned areas is the latent possibility they will develop and threaten the United States of America's sovereignty.

According to the Congressional Research Service there is no evidence to confirm the existence of significant spillover violence from Mexico into the United States.⁶ The official definition of spillover violence is "the intentional targeting of innocent civilians in the United States or official United States government interests in Mexico or the United States."⁷ The key word is "significant" as it is clear from the government's narrow definition of spillover violence it has in fact occurred. In December 2010, a United States Border Patrol Agent was shot and killed by suspected members of transnational criminal organizations in Nogales, Arizona.⁸ Prior to this incident there were several other occasions in which gun fire was exchanged between Border Patrol Agents and members of transnational criminal organizations.⁹ In August 2010 the University of Texas at El Paso was struck by bullets that originated in Juarez, Mexico.¹⁰ Spillover violence from Mexico is occurring but by using a narrowly defined term the United States remains ambivalent as to what actions to pursue to address the issue. Given the presence of transnational criminal organizations in over 230 cities in the United States it is logical to conclude that violence is increasing.¹¹ The issue is the narrow definition and lack of specified data. The United States government is dependent on local and state law enforcement agencies to accurately report not only crimes but who is committing the crimes. Unfortunately, the data is only as good as what is entered into the system leading to the potential of creating a false image. Regardless, it is a reasonable conclusion, if the transnational criminal organizations in Mexico continue to grow they will continue spreading throughout the United States and violence will increase as a by-product of that growth. The violence may not meet the United States definition of "significant" but how many innocent people need to perish before the violence is considered significant? What level of violence is unacceptable? Spillover violence has existed since the border between the United States and Mexico was established. It is time to recognize that spillover violence exists and has already reached the threshold of significant.

Corruption is nothing new to the country of Mexico. In fact it is quite ubiquitous throughout society. A study completed by Global Integrity, a nongovernmental agency, gave Mexico an overall weak rating, versus a moderate or strong rating in terms of its susceptibility to corruption.¹² In 1995, the Central Intelligence Agency released a report that cast a shadow upon

⁶ Congressional Research Service. *Southwest Border Violence: Issues in Identifying and Measuring Spillover Violence*, Jennifer E. Lake and others (Washington, DC: 2010), p 19, http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/R41075_20100216.pdf (accessed March 21, 2011).

⁷ Ibid., p 12.

⁸ Joshua R. Miller, Edmund DeMarche, "Border Patrol Agent Killed in Southern Arizona," Fox News Corporation, <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/12/15/border-patrol-agent-killed-southern-arizona/#> (accessed March 21, 2011).

⁹ Adriana G. Licon, "Mexican gunman fires across border toward U.S. highway workers," *El Paso Times*, January 14, 2011, http://www.elpasotimes.com/ci_17087113 (accessed March 21, 2011).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Russell B. Lane, "A Crisis We Must Confront," *The Police Chief*, March 2011, http://www.policechiefmagazine.org/magazine/index.cfm?fuseaction=display_arch&article_id=1768&issue_id=42009 (accessed March 21, 2011).

¹² Global Integrity, "Mexico Global Integrity Index," Global Integrity, <http://www.globalintegrity.org/reports/2006/mexico/index.cfm?gclid=CPfF9N2Y4qcCFQmt7QoddRbwxA> (accessed March 21, 2011).

Carlos Salinas de Gortari the former President of Mexico.¹³ The report suggests that as President, Mr. Salinas had possibly participated in the corrupt activities of his relatives who had direct ties to transnational criminal organizations in Mexico.¹⁴ Though no charges were ever filed, the former President agreed to a self imposed exile to Ireland at the conclusion of his Presidency.¹⁵ In 1997, General Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo the head of Mexico's version of the Drug Enforcement Administration was fired after an investigation revealed he had received substantial bribes from the different transnational criminal organizations.¹⁶ He was later charged and sentenced to serve approximately forty years in prison.¹⁷ Corruption continues to permeate all levels of Mexican governments and has crossed the border into the United States as evidenced in the arrest and conviction of Martha Garnica a former U.S. Border Patrol agent who pled guilty to six counts of drug smuggling, human trafficking and bribery.¹⁸ Transnational criminal organizations are so adaptive and influential that they now employ cold war era spy tactics to corrupt United States officials.¹⁹ These were the same state sponsored tactics used to corrupt the likes of Aldrich Ames, one of the most notorious spies in the history of the United States. With a 300 percent increase in the number of corruption investigations initiated in the United States it is likely that the transnational criminal organizations will continue to target and corrupt United States government officials.²⁰ However, it is doubtful the transnational criminal organizations will enjoy the same level of corruption in the United States as in Mexico, but what level is deemed acceptable by United States authorities?

The United States economy is inextricably linked to Mexico in terms of imports, exports and direct foreign investment. The United States consumes approximately eighty percent of Mexico's exports which represents approximately ten percent of total United States imports.²¹ Simultaneously, about 14 percent of total United States exports are sent to Mexico.²² A disruption to Mexican imports or United States exports would likely result in higher prices being passed to consumers, negatively affecting both countries gross domestic product. Of significant concern is Mexico's ability to continue supplying the United States demand for crude oil.²³ In 2010, approximately 10 percent of the United States crude oil imports originated from Mexico.²⁴ Disrupting supply would have a traumatic effect on the price of gasoline causing the prices of other commodities to rise and have a negative effect on the consumer price index. Studies show that the gross domestic product contracts when energy prices rise unexpectedly and history

¹³ Tim Golden, "Salinas: Plenty of Smoke, No Smoking Gun," *The New York Times*, July 11, 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/07/11/world/salinas-plenty-of-smoke-no-smoking-gun.html?ref=carlossalinasdegortari> (accessed March 21, 2011).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Frontline, "Carlos Salinas," Frontline, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/mexico/family/carlossalinas.html> (accessed March 21, 2011).

¹⁶ Susan E. Reed, "Certifiable – Mexico's Corruption, Washington's Indifference," Frontline, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/mexico/readings/newrepublic.html> (accessed March 21, 2011).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ceci Connolly, "Woman's links to Mexican drug cartel a saga of corruption on U.S. side of border," *Washington Post*, September 12, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/11/AR2010091105687.html> (accessed March 21, 2011).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Mexico Institute, *More Than Neighbors: An Overview of Mexico and U.S. Relations*, Andrew Selee, Woodrow Wilson Center (Washington D.C.), p 1.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p 35.

²⁴ Congressional Research Service. *U.S. Mexico Economic Relations: Trends, Issues, and Implications*, M. Angeles Villarreal (Washington, DC: 2010), p 4, http://assets.opencrs.org/rpts/RL32934_20100331.pdf (accessed March 21, 2011).

shows there is a direct correlation between the rise of energy prices and economic recessions.²⁵ If the existing conditions in Mexico are allowed to persist, Mexico will become a net importer of oil in the next ten years which would affect the United States but in reality would destroy the Mexican economy as oil exports represent approximately forty percent of its gross national product.²⁶ Currently, the Mexican Constitution places limitations on foreign companies investing in the Mexican oil industry, but if recent efforts by the Calderon administration is attempting to change this dynamic. If the Calderon administration is successful, Mexico will relax the limitations and invite foreign investors to share their technology and the cost of deep water exploration.²⁷ It is likely that United States oil companies will assist the Mexican oil industry in exploiting its reserves. Doing so increases the amount of money invested in Mexico by the United States. The United States is Mexico's largest foreign direct investment partner, equating to over 11 billion dollars. The risk to the investors is real as evidenced previously when Mexico nationalized its oil industry costing foreign direct investors an unknown sum of money.²⁸ If the existing conditions continue in Mexico the negative effects could be devastating to United States investors and indirectly cause significant damage to the United States economy.

The impunity rate in Mexico is approximately 99 percent.²⁹ Equating to a mere one conviction out of every 100 crimes committed actually resulting in a sentencing.³⁰ This is evidence of an ineffective justice system that is creating an environment of lawlessness. By their own account the Mexican government acknowledges the existence of approximately 233 zones of impunity, which are areas where the government exercises little to no control over the population.³¹ In an attempt to gain the upper hand in restoring order throughout the country the Calderon administration began battling corruption within the government while simultaneously conducting a war on transnational criminal organizations. One of the initiatives issued by the Calderon administration eliminated 3,200 federal police officers who were suspected of having ties with the numerous drug cartels in Mexico.³² This drastic action was in response to incidents like the one that occurred in Los Ramones and General Teran. An entire police force in Los Ramos quit after they suffered a well-coordinated attack on their headquarters.³³ In General Teran transnational criminal organizations conducted coordinated attacks on officers and eventually captured and decapitated two police officers resulting in the resignation of the police

²⁵ U.S. Department of Energy, *Energy Price Impacts on the U.S. Economy*, Ronald Early and Kay Smith (Washington DC: 2001), http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/economy/energy_price.html (accessed March 21, 2011).

²⁶ Congressional Research Service. *The Mexican Economy After the Global Financial Crisis*, M. Angeles Villarreal (Washington, DC: 2010), p 9, http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/R41402_20100916.pdf (accessed March 21, 2011).

²⁷ Clifford Krauss and Elisabeth Malkin, "Mexico Oil Politics Keeps Riches Just Out of Reach," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/09/business/global/09pemex.html?pagewanted=1&_r=2 (accessed March 21, 2011).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Kevin Casas-Zamora, "Mexico's Forever War," *Foreign Policy*, December 22, 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/12/22/mexico_s_forever_war (accessed March 21, 2011).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Mexican Drug Trafficking," *The New York Times*, March 22, 2011, http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/mexico/drug_trafficking/index.html (accessed March 21, 2011).

³² Ken Ellingwood, "Mexico fires 3,200 federal police," *Los Angeles Times*, August 31, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/aug/31/world/la-fg-mexico-police-fired-20100831> (accessed March 21, 2011).

³³ "Every cop in town quits after Mexico attack," MSNBC, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/39863570/ns/world_news-americas/ (accessed March 21, 2011).

chief and all the officers.³⁴ Couple these attacks with a targeted assassination of the acting Federal Police Chief Edgar Gomez and the Mayor of Santiago, Edelmiro Cavazos, and it is logical to conclude that the state is no longer the ruling authority.³⁵ Given the existing conditions in Mexico, it is easy to understand why there are so many areas where transnational criminal organizations exercise more authority over the territory than the Mexican officials. This permissive environment is ripe for those that wish to do America harm and have the potential to serve as staging areas for future attacks within the United States.

John Jay and Alexander Hamilton both wrote about the importance of trade with other nations and the necessity for the common defense of America.³⁶ Mexico is a substantial trade partner but also the source of a threat that undermines the union. Transnational crime directly threatens the United States as well as governance and stability in foreign countries. Over the last 15 years, transnational crime has expanded dramatically in scale and scope.³⁷ The convergence of transnational crimes such as the arms and drug trades, linkages between terrorist groups and crime, increased violence associated with networks of human traffickers, and the impact of corruption on stability in countries where transnational criminal organizations are located, pose particularly serious risks to U.S. interests and those of our partners.³⁸ The question derived from these circumstances is one of strategy. Whether the above mentioned threats are accurately portrayed or not it is necessary to develop a strategy directing the United States' national powers towards a common purpose. The strategy could reflect the Wilsonian doctrine of spreading democracy or a Jacksonian doctrine of isolationism.³⁹ The inclination to choose one ideology over the other is really a matter of perspective. Regardless, even George Washington recognized the need to engage other nations on some level in order to advance commerce.⁴⁰ Given this historical context coupled with interconnectivity of today's global economy, it is reasonable to conclude that the United States should not isolate itself from Mexico. Therefore, some form of strategy must help craft the current way ahead for United States and Mexican relations. If the Secretary of State of the United States, Hillary Clinton, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mullen are correct in their strategic assessment that the National Debt poses the greatest threat to our sovereignty, then the policy must focus in a way that maximizes the use of the United States national powers.⁴¹

³⁴ "A Mexican Town's Entire Police Force Quits After Cartels Behead Fellow Officers," Fox News, <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2011/01/28/mexican-towns-entire-police-force-quits-cartels-behead-fellow-officers/#> (accessed March 21, 2011).

³⁵ "Mexico Under Siege: The drug war at our doorstep," *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 2011, <http://projects.latimes.com/mexico-drug-war/#/its-a-war> (accessed March 21, 2011).

³⁶ "The Federalist Papers," The Library of Congress, <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/histdox/fedpapers.html> (accessed March 21, 2011).

³⁷ Phil Williams and Dimitri Vlassis, *Combating Transnational Crime: Concepts, Activities and Responses* (Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), 1.

³⁸ Congressional Research Service. *International Terrorism and Transnational Crime: Security Threats, U.S. Policy, and Considerations for Congress*, John Rollins and Liana S. Wyler (Washington, DC: 2010), p 1, <http://www.fas.org/spp/crs/terror/R41004.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2011).

³⁹ Walter R. Mead, *Special Providence: American foreign policy and how it changed the world* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xvii.

⁴⁰ George Washington, "State of the Union Address: January 8, 1790," Penn State University, <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/poldocs/uspessu/SUaddressGWashington.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2011).

⁴¹ Dell Hill, "US Debt a National Security Issue," uncoverage.net, <http://www.uncoverage.net/2010/10/us-debt-a-national-security-issue/> (accessed March 21, 2011).

Though some would disagree the United States does not have a strategy for Mexico.⁴² The impetus for what is being called the existing strategy was the Merida Initiative.⁴³ The Merida initiative is a security cooperation agreement between the United States and the governments of Mexico and Central America.⁴⁴ Essentially the agreement stated that the United States would provide equipment and training to the governments of Mexico and Central America to support the defeat of transnational criminal organizations.⁴⁵ To continue the limited success of the Merida initiative the former United States Ambassador to Mexico, Ambassador Pascaul, created the Beyond Merida initiative.⁴⁶ This is touted by some as the United States strategy for Mexico, but in fact like its predecessor, Beyond Merida is not a strategy but a plan. It is true that the word strategy refers to a plan but the plan should be directed towards accomplishing a particular goal. In the case of foreign relations it is necessary to craft a version of what Liddell Hart calls “grand strategy” which means directing the employment of all national powers towards the accomplishment of a political objective.⁴⁷ The strategy the ambassador purported is merely a list of objectives meant to codify the new initiatives with those previously stated in Merida. The former ambassador’s strategy or plan consists of four distinct objectives which are: disrupting capacity of organized crime to operate, institutionalizing capacity to sustain rule of law, creating a 21st century border and building strong and resilient communities.⁴⁸ Given the vagueness of these objectives it is possible that regardless of the actions taken by the national powers they could argue they are in support of the purported strategy without understanding the ultimate goal they are striving to attain. Worse is the absence of an actual goal. What would it mean for Mexico or the United States if the stated objectives were accomplished? What conditions would exist in both countries if they were successful in meeting the stated objectives?

“Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.”⁴⁹ Though this quotation is often attributed to Sun Tzu, he is not the only theorist that asserts strategy is the foundation of achieving success. Both Carl von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri, Baron Jomini agreed that in order to be successful it is necessary to craft a strategy.⁵⁰ In fact the Secretary of State of the United States also agrees that strategy is crucial to success as stated in the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review.⁵¹ In the review the Secretary stated that the State Department “must improve our own strategy, planning, and evaluation processes.”⁵² Though the National Security Council leads the interagency and coordinates policy, in the field, all agencies operate under the authority of the Chief of Mission who is the U.S. Ambassador and therefore responsible for creating the strategy in which all other

⁴² Ginger Thompson and Marc Lacey, “U.S. and Mexico Revise Joint Antidrug Strategy,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/24/world/americas/24mexico.html> (accessed March 21, 2011).

⁴³ Congressional Research Service. *Mexico-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress*, Clare R. Seelke (Washington, DC: 2011), p 12, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32724.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2011).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Eric L. Olson and Christopher E. Wilson, “Beyond Merida: The Evolving Approach to Security Cooperation,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: Mexico Institute, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/docs/Beyond%20Merida.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2011).

⁴⁷ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: Second Revised Edition* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1967), 366.

⁴⁸ U.S. Embassy Mexico City, “Merida Initiative At A Glance; The Four Pillars of Merida,” U.S. Department of State, http://www.usembassy-mexico.gov/eng/merida/emerida_factsheet_fourpillarscooperation.html (accessed March 21, 2011).

⁴⁹ Wikiquote, Sun Tzu,” Wikiquote, http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/The_Art_of_War (accessed March 21, 2011).

⁵⁰ Craig A. Snyder, *Contemporary Security and Strategy* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 19.

⁵¹ Hillary R. Clinton, *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review Leading Through Civilian Power* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), 5.

⁵² Ibid.

agencies emulate to achieve success.⁵³ “For the Department of State and USAID to better engage agency counterparts and foster greater coherence, we must adopt new attitudes and new ways of doing business. We must actively engage other agencies in strategy development and planning, in addition to policy implementation.”⁵⁴

Organizations fail because they do not articulate a strategy that purports a purpose which ties their actions to an overall strategic purpose. The State Department’s mission is to “Advance freedom for the benefit of the American people and the international community by helping to build and sustain a more democratic, secure, and prosperous world composed of well-governed states that respond to the needs of their people, reduce widespread poverty, and act responsibly within the international system.”⁵⁵ If the United States wants to succeed then it must create a strategic purpose for using its national powers to defeat transnational criminal organizations and help to improve the existing conditions in Mexico.

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⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ U.S. Department of State, “Diplomacy in Action,” U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/index.htm> (accessed March 21, 2011).